MARK TWAIN IN PERSON, 1885: READING IN WISCONSIN

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Mark Twain and his performing partner George Washington Cable devoted a week of their four-month tour during the 1884-85 lecture season to cities in Wisconsin: Janesville, Madison, LaCrosse, and Milwaukee. They appeared in Wisconsin only three weeks before the publication of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Interest in Twain's new book was growing as a result of the long and highly successful lecture campaign, and Cable too was quite a sensation with his popular novels of Creole life and his vigorous public campaign for Black equality. Consequently, the two spoke to packed houses across the state and consistently received enthusiastic reviews from their audiences and from the newspaper writers who described the literary event in superlative phrases. The *Janesville Daily Gazette* called their performance "one of the best appreciated given in this city for a long time"; the *Wisconsin State Journal* in Madison said "the entertainment pleased all"; the La-Crosse *Morning Chronicle* pronounced the reading "decidedly the leading success of the winter." One critic has called the tour "the most celebrated reading tour of the decade"; this is the same as calling it *the* entertainment event of the 1880s.[1]

It is no coincidence that we are observing the centennial of *Huck Finn's* publication and a major lecture tour of Twain's career. This tour, his first lengthy stage schedule in fifteen years, was intended to generate sales for *Huck Finn* and raise money for his new publishing house. American publication came on February 18, 1885; *Huck Finn* had been published in England and Canada two months earlier in order to secure the foreign copyrights. Several chapters were serialized by *Century* in December and January to whet the appetites of readers. The lecture tour extended from the middle of November 1884 to the end of February 1885. After a weekend performance in Chicago, Twain and Cable then read in Janesville on January 20th, Madison the 21st, LaCrosse the 22nd, St. Paul, Minnesota the 23rd, Minneapolis the 24th (Sunday the 25th was an off-day), Winona, Minnesota the 26th, Madison again on the 27th, and Milwaukee the 28th and 29th; they then returned to Illinois for readings in Rockford and Chicago. In larger cities like Milwaukee and Chicago, the two would speak on consecutive nights; otherwise, they performed an exhausting schedule of one-nighters. Even Sundays, when Cable refused to work or travel, were hardly restful for Twain. He complained bitterly that Cable's piety actually aggravated the tiresome routine, because Twain could never rest on a day when he performed. During the week the authors usually were traveling and working every day. Twain did make money on the tour and, more importantly, helped stimulate a large first-sale for *Huck Finn,* but he worked considerably harder on the tour than he had planned and, understandably, refused his business manager's proposal to extend it another month. There was never any problem in finding bookings.

Twain's stage performances, part of the marketing for *Huck Finn,* suggest how he wanted the book received. His selections from it are exclusively humorous: Huck and Jim discussing the wisdom of Solomon or the logic of having a separate language for Frenchmen; Huck and Tom planning their ridiculous "evasions" for freeing Jim; and the episode of the river tough fighting, already printed in *Life on the Mississippi.* Twain had considered a program from *Huck*

Finn alone but decided for more variety.[2] Still, he emphasized local color and humor, but not exactly satire. Notice that Jim is likely to be simply a clown in these stage readings. Twain on stage seemed rather like the man who wrote the headnote to *Huck Finn* demanding no serious moral interpretations.

The emphasis on humor from Twain was wise publicity, of course. But in larger context, the tour itself was still part of the long creative process that produced *Huck Finn,* a book which transcends mere entertainment, and marks a change in the direction of Twain's career. He was revisiting his youth in towns where he once lived—Hannibal, Missouri and Keokuk, Iowa, for example—as he had done in 1882 to finish *Life on the Mississippi.* Furthermore, Cable, a friend for two years now, was certainly an influence on Twain's thought. He was best-known, in fact, as a Southerner speaking out against the South for its racism. His latest book had suggested that the South's losing the Civil War was a fortunate outcome. Moreover, Cable actually had helped set the groundwork for *Huck Finn's* reception by breaking from the unofficial literary tradition of Southern apology for slavery and the war. Two years earlier Twain's most biting comments on Southern culture written for *Life on the Mississippi* had been suppressed. (Cable also encouraged Twain to read Malory's *Morte D'Arthur,* and some of his first notebook entries on *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* appear during the tour.) Cable's part in sharpening Twain's social criticism has never been fully explored. Shortly after the tour was finished, Twain wrote a letter, recently discovered, in which he promises to pay tuition and board for one of Yale University's first Black law students.[3]

This lecture tour of the two reconstructed Southerners is also interesting as a portrait of Twain, not just as a footnote to the publication history of *Huck Finn.* It was one of the few (and maybe last) times in Twain's life when everything seemed to be going well for him. His marriage was happy, his reputation as a writer was established, and he was socially and financially secure. At age fifty, Samuel Clemens was a success, before family tragedies and financial difficulties impelled his creative talents toward social invective. A middle-aged man now, everything he wrote sold. He was comfortable with his work and his audience, and they were comfortable with him. He was "Mark Twain" to them, the humorous writer from the American frontier, recognized as such and generally pleased by his reputation. He did once, at least, complain to Cable that he was cheapening himself as the humorist only, but any dissatisfaction with his public role never came through his stage performances.[4] At the height of his career as Mark Twain the funnyman, the author had no trouble staying with that public persona. His creative talents, too, were at a high point all through this four-month tour.

Twain varied his readings somewhat so that his performance was always fresh and so that he would not repeat himself too much for return audiences. He was especially unhappy and bored when Cable did not change his readings. In his Wisconsin appearances, Twain's selections from *Huck Finn* were read with "The Awful German Language," "The Jumping Frog," "A Desperate Encounter with an Interviewer," and the ghost story of "The Golden Arm." Advertisements and programs usually left his concluding piece open, and Twain often tried to choose something appropriate to his audience's particular responsiveness. After a few unsuccessful attempts at simply reading early in the tour, Twain spoke from memory, a delivery which reviewers usually noted with compliments. On stage, before this tour, Twain had presented original lectures and read sparingly.[5] Now, he intended mainly to read material published or already set in print, but he was always careful to adapt his material for a vocal stage delivery.

This off-hand manner of delivery in-

creased his casualness and spontaneity and also helped audiences perceive him—as he wished—as a natural story teller, a born wit. His humor was "dry, unconscious, apparently spontaneous," said the Janesville *Daily Recorder.* "He never smiles when telling a story that causes his audience to laugh until tears trickle down their cheeks, but on the contrary, pulls his iron gray moustache and scowls," but, "He put his audience in good humor with the first sentence and it continued until the last." The *Janesville Daily Gazette* published a preview which described Twain's delivery as "a dry, earnest manner, as though he really believed . . . the ludicrous situations . . . and expected his listeners to." The *Wisconsin State Journal* said Twain was "active in his movements . . . [but] carelessly," like "some awkward overgrown boy. The expression of his face scarcely changes during an entertainment, though when the audience laughs intrude there is the greatest air of injury about it."

His delivery was always studied, however, just as he describes his formula in "How to Tell a Story." Twain was a careful performer, and he received enthusiastic responses which justified the rather steep admission prices of fifty cents, seventy-five cents, and a dollar. Incidentally, the prices never varied, except that sometimes a good auditorium had no fifty-cent seats. Twain was going out to make money. Now, a river city like LaCrosse was probably economically more prosperous in 1885 than in 1985, compared to other cities in the state; but, even so, packing the local opera house with a thousand people strained more people's incomes there than in Chicago or Milwaukee. Still, not one newspaper writer anywhere in the state complained about the admission cost; in fact, writers usually complained about the audiences or auditoriums, if they were not suitable for such an important literary event. The LaCrosse *Chronicle* and Milwaukee *Evening Wisconsin* particularly noted that people arriving fashionably late were disturbing the performers and disrupting the show. The *Wisconsin State Journal* and Janesville *Daily Recorder* said the theater was too hot or too cold. But no one ever said that the spectators did not get their money's worth, even though Twain himself privately expressed doubts on occasion.

Cable usually spoke first (Twain particularly hated to work to an unsettled house). The two then took turns on stage and varied the tempo and tone of the program. Twain was the humorist and Cable the serious social commentator. The Janesville *Daily Recorder* said Cable's appearance and delivery denoted "intelligence . . . and the gestures and movements of a polished gentleman," while "Twain's every moment [on stage] was indicative of the droll humor that was fairly bubbling out of him." The paper concluded, "They are both stars of no little magnitude in their specialties."

These roles were deliberately complementary. By design, Cable was to portray moral sentiment and edifying thought, Twain to evoke uncontrolled laughter. Twain was the better-known personality, but he was known principally as a comedian and performer, and Cable actually enjoyed the reputation of being the more literary man.[6] Reviews often sounded as though they were paraphrasing the advertisements, which promised "superb fun" and "wit" from Twain and "exquisite humor and pathos" from Cable. The La-Crosse *Chronicle* dutifully reported on Twain's "grotesque humor" and Cable's "delicate pathos." the *Janesville Daily Gazette* promised viewers "sentiment, pathos, and delicate touches of humor" from Cable and "the wildest flights of hyperbole" from Twain, "superbly droll and outrageously extravagant."

Twain always received top billing in the advertisements; it was his tour, of course, and Cable worked on salary from him. In addition, Twain always received more praise as an entertainer when the two were reviewed together, but Cable was not slighted or criticized. It was not uncommon for a reporter to give more space in a review to Mark Twain's

doing and sayings but to reserve his chief accolade for the art of Cable's writing and reading—appropriate for their intended roles, Cable the thoughtful literary artist and Twain the natural "character."[7] For instance, the Janesville *Daily Recorder* called Cable "a good elocutionist and a man of literary ability," but Twain was simply unique "in his inimitable style." Occasionally, there was feature material in papers on Cable's social thought. Both the *Wisconsin State Journal* and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* printed some correspondence between a Black resident of Wisconsin and Cable in which he (by implication, the papers too) stressed the necessity for cultural assimilation. In addition, the *Madison Daily Democrat* reviewed only Cable to emphasize his social beliefs.

This lecture tour was a literary event, but one finds that local papers showed their biases in characterizing and complimenting the performers. The tour was front-page news both in Madison and LaCrosse, for example, but in the state capital it was Cable the reformer featured on page one, and in the river town it was the unruly former steamboat pilot. The LaCrosse *Republican and Leader,* for instance, wrote about Twain's restlessness, his constant smoking, talking, and moving among train cars as though he was particularly uncomfortable about traveling in civilized society. However, in Milwaukee, the *Evening Wisconsin* and *Sentinel* featured stories on Cable because he had based characters in his Civil War novel on people then living in that city. The largest press coverage, about two columns each, was in papers for LaCrosse and Milwaukee. Twain had been in LaCrosse as a traveler and described it favorably in *Life on the Mississippi,* although this is not mentioned by the *Chronicle* reporter. Three years earlier the paper had written about Twain's brief stop. It is easier to explain the interest of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* and *Evening Wisconsin.* In addition to whatever civic pride they may have had, the two dailies competed for news and feature material about the season's biggest literary event, one interviewing Cable and the other Twain.

The critical reviews were always uniformly favorable although some of the uniformity borders on plagiarism. One of the stories in the *Wisconsin State Journal* contains a paragraph that is copied almost word-for-word from the *Janesville Daily Gazette* of the day before. Of course, this was within the limits of usual journalistic practice a hundred years ago and constitutes only an endorsement of the first review. Twain's selections usually were reviewed at greater length than Cable's. Usually, however, papers refrained from detailed description of the entertainment. One particularly effective piece which was summarized a few times was "The Awful German Language," in which Twain said that he would rather decline two drinks than one adjective, a fairly literary joke to cite. "The Golden Arm" was described in several papers, showing how Twain could methodically lead his listeners to the sensational conclusion of the story when everyone jumped at the ghostly accusation, "You've got it!" On the whole, papers quote sparingly; in fact, the LaCrosse *Chronicle* reporter observes that the local audience was familiar with these two popular writers. Reviews usually describe manner of delivery and appearance more than content. The emphasis, especially for Twain, is more on the literary "character" of the author rather than any particular work.

The Janesville *Daily Recorder* pronounced the entertainment the "literary event of the season"; Twain in particular was "enthusiastically received." According to the *Janesville Daily Gazette,* "Mark Twain, from his first bow to the close of the entertainment, kept the audience in continued laughter, while Mr. Cable was listened to with deep interest." The *Madison Daily Democrat* quoted a press review from St. Paul: "The audience laughed only once during the evening, but that was from 8 o'clock till 10." The dry understatement of this

observation was typical in a way; general pronouncements on the readings often came in cliche-like superlative praise, but for description reporters sometimes tried to imitate Twain's comic style.[8] So it was that the reporter for the LaCrosse *Chronicle* noted the disparate appearances of the two authors and said, "Such a pair—such a team, let us say—in animal life, would make a horse laugh. But they pull well together."

Twain's appearance and stage delivery were suited for the image he wanted to project of a completely artless, unselfconscious wit. The Milwaukee *Evening Wisconsin* said he "carelessly and indifferently sauntered upon the stage" and read "[w]ithout ceremony." The *Wisconsin State Journal* called his stage style a dry recital" which nonetheless "kept the audience in a constant roar of laughter." The LaCrosse *Chronicle* said, "He comes upon the stage as though looking for a pin on a floor covered with eggs." Then, "Speech falls from his lips as though against his will." Finally, "He disappears with a canter and if he had not said a word, there would still be something to laugh at."

In physical appearance, the LaCrosse paper said, he was "tall, stooping, shambling of gait with tumbled hair and uncertain moustache, the counterpart of nothing except his odd self." Other papers reported the same. The Janesville *Daily Recorder* noted that he was "tall, awkward, with heavy bushy hair . . . heavy moustache . . . and he drawled his words out." Reporters and audiences came to these readings with an image of Twain derived from his books, and Twain was always in character for them. The *Winona Daily Republican* even headlined its story "Innocents Abroad" and noted Twain's movements as "side-long, awkward stride, amusing in itself . . . [with] a natural and easy force to his gestures."

Everywhere Twain spoke in Wisconsin he had a full house; often he sold out before the night of the performance. The *Wisconsin State Journal,* on his second stop in Madison, thus promised an entertaining night for "people [who] were not able to secure seats" at the first. "These two gentlemen are drawing marvellously wherever they appear," it said. And every audience called for encores; Twain offered two encores in LaCrosse. Cable too was usually recalled to the stage, but he always allowed Twain to finish the program if any encores were called for. Twain never explicitly insisted upon this, but he clearly wanted to remain the star attraction of the tour.

The apparent success of the tour at all stops in Wisconsin and Minnesota gave no hint of troubles in the background. In fact, Twain was not entirely pleased with receipts and blamed his business agent, nor was he pleased with Cable over the course of time. Cable's unwavering Sabbath piety irked Twain. Cable had started out encouraging Twain to accompany him to church services and reading his Bible to him on the train, both of which he diplomatically discontinued when Twain ignored him. Cable never swore or smoked, although there is no record that he ever upbraided Twain for these favorite hobbies of his. Worse, perhaps, Cable would not play billiards with Twain. Cable's expense account was a bit rich for Twain, and, worst of all, his time on stage seemed too great. These are all complaints which Twain often wrote to his wife, particularly often after the new year began and the tour went into the mid-west. He seems to have kept his complaints to himself on the tour, however; at least Cable did not record any awareness that Twain was growing irritated with him. In fact, Twain did not continue any criticism of his partner after the trip ended—actually he called him a perfect traveling companion—and it is reasonable to say he simply lost patience at times for all the traveling and work, and for the January weather in Wisconsin. From Madison, Twain wrote that he was cold in his hotel. In LaCrosse, his business manager noted that he was "a little sharp" with peo-

ple at the train depot. In Milwaukee, Twain tried a hot bath before going on stage in order to refresh himself, but this apparently only tired him more. Twain actually confided to Cable that he felt the second night in Milwaukee was a disaster.[9] Twain and Cable generally suffered from nothing worse than weariness, cold, and occasional impatience with each other, but their manager suffered a mild heart attack in Madison and had to be left behind in Milwaukee to recuperate. The *Evening Wisconsin* noted the agent's illness but not how heavily it actually weighed down the spirits of the two performers.

From what one can know of the background to this lecture tour, already almost three months long, it is remarkable that Twain always managed to stay "on stage," so to speak, for local audiences and reporters. For instance, a *Milwaukee Sentinel* reporter sent to interview Cable went mistakenly into Twain's room and found him "decidedly en dishabille." His "afternoon attire" was "a long white nightshirt . . . and a cigar." In effect, Twain was discovered with his pants down, but he corrected the reporter's directions and played up to his amazement with obvious pleasure. In Madison, "about twenty" people followed Twain and Cable to their hotel. Cable came down from his room and greeted each one individually and politely, even though "he expected to meet but two or three," according to the *Wisconsin State Journal.* Twain only sent his regrets by Cable, and the paper granted him "a little needed slumber." Apparently, no one felt slighted.

Twain did grant an interview to a reporter from the *Evening Wisconsin* in Milwaukee, who found him quite agreeable despite showing obvious signs of the cold weather. Twain had read his imaginary "Desperate Encounter with an Interviewer" in Milwaukee, and the *Evening Wisconsin* reporter was perhaps a bit unprepared for the urbane person he actually met. He described Twain as "brusque but genial . . . the result of the varied life he has led." Twain told him that he enjoyed the lecturing, was pleased by the size and responsiveness of the crowds, and was living a hermit-like existence in Hartford, Connecticut. The reporter described Twain's former wild occupations of steamboat pilot, miner, and traveler. He had had "a rough experience generally," the writer noted, but was only the more admirably masculine for it—an "almost perfect specimen of physical manhood," American frontier character. Twain politely discussed the need for international copyright, his sales of books to date and hopes for *Huck Finn,* and a rather embarrassing bit of publicity for the new book which had leaked out. An engraver had created an obscene illustration out of one woodcut for the salesmen's advance copies of *Huck Finn,* which Twain casually dismissed as "a slight gouge of a graver . . . an indelicate addition to . . . one of my characters." (It was an erect phallus added to a sketch of Reverend Silas Phelps, with Aunt Sally apparently staring at it amusedly and asking, "Who do you reckon it is ?")[10] Twain said that all adulterated copies of the book had been suppressed, and no one need fear finding any obscene illustrations.

In general, no news during Twain's week in Wisconsin showed any hint of the weariness and irritation Twain expressed privately about the long tour and his traveling companions, nor any of his anxiety about preserving his reputation for humor and decency while *Huck Finn* was going to press. The lecture tour was a success in the most important way for Twain; Samuel Clemens was able to remain Mark Twain without fail for over four months. The newspapers usually call him Twain, a tribute to the currency of the literary character he made of himself. The LaCrosse *Chronicle* writer could not even spell Clemens correctly, and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* reporter who was introduced to Mr. Clemens immediately called him Twain. Without exception, newspapers emphasized

the colorful, vivid, and entertaining man—just the image Twain cultivated.

Notes

[1] Fred W. Lorch, *The Trouble Begins at Eight: Mark Twain's Lecture Tours* (Ames: Iowa State University, 1968) 164. Since constant footnoting or even parenthetical references to dates of all newspapers quoted here would simply be intrusive, I have foregone this documentation. With the itinerary in the following paragraph, anyone who wishes to find specific stories can do so easily. All Wisconsin papers are available on microfilm in the State Historical Society, Madison.

[2] Lorch 165.

[3] See Guy A. Cardwell, *Twins of Genius* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1953) 68-77. In addition, see the brief summary of Twain's letter to a dean of the Yale law school in *Time* 25 March 1985: 69.

[4] Cardwell 25.

[5] Lorch 162; Paul Fatout, *Mark Twain on the Lecture Circuit* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1960) 216; and Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1966) 177.

[6] Cardwell 17; and Fatout 205-06, 216-17.

[7] Fatout 222; and Turner 188.

[8] Cardwell 29.

[9] See Cardwell 49; Fatout 211-12; Lorch 174; and Turner 180.

[10] See Walter Blair, *Mark Twain and Huck Finn* (Berkeley: University of California, 1960) 364-67.